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## MASTERS OF MILITARY STUDIES

### SLIM'S GENERALSHIP IN THE 1944 INDIA-BURMA CAMPAIGN

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## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

**Title:** SLIM'S GENERALSHIP IN THE 1944 INDIA-BURMA CAMPAIGN.

**Author:** WALTER E. LUNDIN, Major, U. S. Marine Corps

**Thesis:** I contend that Lieutenant General William Slim's generalship in the 1944 Burma Campaign was the decisive factor that turned the tide in favor of the Allies.

**Discussion:** From January to August 1944 a series of decisive battles was fought along the India-Burma border which resulted in the turning point for that theater of war. After two years of failure the Allies wrested the initiative from Japan and destroyed the myth of Japanese invincibility.

The Allies were successful despite a number of challenges, many self inflicted. The first challenge was to organize and resource defenses of the India-Burma border. The second challenge was to train the soldiers to fight in the jungle clad mountains that typified the area of operations. Inextricably tied to this was the challenge of moving and supplying forces in the rugged environment. Developing a feasible and acceptable plan despite the absence of a coherent theater strategy was the next challenge. This challenge was made more difficult by the complex and dysfunctional command relationships. Finally, there was the challenge of defeating an aggressive and fanatical enemy who had an unblemished record of success in the India-Burma Theater.

Fortunately, the Allies had an answer to these challenges in Lieutenant General William Slim. It was Slim who established the training program that taught the soldiers to fight in the jungle, developed the tactics and techniques to move and sustain forces in the arduous terrain, provided the leadership to overcome the dysfunctional command relationships, and unified the theater strategy. Finally, and most importantly, it was Slim who developed and executed the plan that drew in and defeated the *Japanese 15<sup>th</sup> Army* thereby setting the conditions for the successful re-conquest of Burma in 1945.

**Conclusion:** It is conceivable that Southeast Asia Command could have been successful in its 1944 battles without William Slim. However, it is probable that the victories would not have been as decisive nor the actions across the entire theater as unified.

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## **INTRODUCTION**

From January to August 1944 a series of decisive battles was fought along the India-Burma border which resulted in the turning point for that theater of war. After two years of failure the Allies wrested the initiative from Japan and destroyed the myth of Japanese invincibility. Allied success was made more difficult by their own vacillating and unrealistic strategies, complex command relations, the formidable terrain and weather, and by an offense launched by the Japanese *Burma Area Army*.<sup>1</sup> I contend that Lieutenant General William Slim's generalship in the 1944 Burma Campaign was the decisive factor that turned the tide in favor of the Allies.<sup>2</sup>

This paper will explore how Slim's generalship enabled the allies to achieve victory in Burma. I will begin by providing an orientation to the Burma area of operations. I will then examine Slim's military background and the lessons he learned leading up to his 1944 campaign. Next, I will consider the Allied and Japanese strategies and plans and how terrain and weather affected operations. This will be followed by an evaluation of command relations, integral to understanding the situation. I will then evaluate Slim's operational plans and his conduct of the battles, focusing on his key decisions. I will conclude by examining Slim's generalship and its impact on victory.

## **ORIENTATION (See map 1)**

Burma is located on the eastern coast of the Bay of Bengal. It is bordered by Thailand to the southeast and east, by China to the east and northeast, by India to the northwest and west, and by the Bay of Bengal west and south.<sup>3</sup> Its major road, rail, and sea lines of communication run through the center of the country and continue south into Thailand to the Bay of Bengal. There is a road and rail route that provides access to southwest China from Burma's northwest frontier.

There were a few small fair weather roads leading from Imphal into Burma. However, there was only one reliable road running from Imphal back to the major lines of communication in Eastern India. After the disasters of 1941 and 1942, all the ground lines of communication in Burma were in Japanese hands and the threat of the Japanese fleet made the sea lines of communication untenable.

Britain was unprepared for war in its crown colony of Burma when the Japanese invaded in the first few months of 1942. Burma was not linked to India, which was the main British bastion in Southeast Asia, by a ground line of communication (LOC). Burma's infrastructure was not prepared for its defense nor did it possess a trained or properly equipped self-defense force. As a result, the British and U.S.-led Chinese forces were quickly defeated and forced to withdraw to the north. Their retreat did not end until the Allied forces reached the Imphal plain in the Assam region of India.

After withdrawing, the Allied forces deployed along the entire length of the India-Burma border, though most of the border was undefended. The Allies were concentrated in three areas. The U.S.-led Chinese forces of Northern Combat Area Command were at Ledo and had begun offensive operations in Burma's Hukawng Valley. The British 4<sup>th</sup> Corps was based at Imphal and had divisions pushed forward towards the India-Burma border along the Chindwin River. The British 15<sup>th</sup> Corps was in Arakan on the coast and had units across the border in Burma.

Except for 15<sup>th</sup> Corps, the Allied forces were supplied by a precarious rail, road, and river line of communication running east through the Bengal and Assam regions of India. The airlift to China was supported by a string of airfields in the Brahmaputra River Valley, which was also supported by the same ground LOC. The central node for all ground communications was the town of Dimapur. Holding Dimapur was critical because the bulk of the supplies for N.C.A.C.

and 4<sup>th</sup> Corps passed through it. Imphal was important because it protected the vital ground LOC in Bengal and Assam and was the ideal location from where to launch a ground offensive to retake Burma. The Arakan coast was important because it would provide airfields to support ground and amphibious operations in central and southern Burma and to defend southeast India from invasion.

From the Japanese perspective, the key geographic features in Burma were the Irrawaddy and Chindwin rivers as well as the rail line running from the port of Rangoon through Indaw and to Myitkyina in northern Burma. These LOCs allowed the Japanese to sustain and move their units throughout Burma. Two other key geographic features were the hills separating the Chindwin River from Imphal and the Hukawng Valley (see map 1). The hills to the northwest of the Chindwin River were steep and jungle clad with few passable roads. The Hukawng Valley was important because the Allies intended to build a road along it from Ledo to Myitkyina where an existing road existed that continued into China.

Military operations in the India-Burma-China Theater were made more challenging by the terrain and weather. The terrain and vegetation along the Burma-India border was mountainous jungle. There were few roads, which were prone to washouts during heavy rains. Movement cross country was arduous. The greatest difficulties were encountered in supplying units. Everything had to be carried by either man or animal. Re-supplying units away from the roads was especially difficult and most soldiers, on both sides, suffered from malnutrition and lack of ammunition. Death by starvation was not uncommon for defeated forces.

The terrain was rendered more daunting by the weather. The weather in Burma varies between a monsoon season, when rain inundates the terrain, to a dry season where water, outside of rivers and major streams, is difficult to find.<sup>4</sup> The monsoons, which begin around June,

rendered all but the few all weather roads impassable and flooded most of the airfields. The monsoons also brought disease-- malaria, Dengue Fever, and Scrub Typhus. Casualties on both sides due to disease far outweighed those caused by combat. Comparatively speaking, 14<sup>th</sup> Army's disease casualty rates were much lower than the Japanese due to Slim's emphasis on preventative medicine, aerial medical evacuation, and forward-based rehabilitation camps.<sup>5</sup>

The impact of the monsoon was a major consideration in campaign design since all but minor operations were precluded. Both sides planned their operation in the first half of 1944 to ensure they had a good base of operations and lines of communication and to ensure enemy forces were bereft of the same when the monsoon season began.

The vast distances, rugged terrain, sever weather conditions, and perception of Japanese invincibility made the Allied position appear untenable. However, the Allies used the time between their 1942 withdrawal and the decisive battles of early 1944 to prepare for the expected Japanese offensive against India. They turned India into a massive base to support the creation of operational forces and to build up the administrative<sup>6</sup> infrastructure needed to achieve a sound defense and ultimate victory. The plain around the city of Imphal became key to the defense of India and to the airfields supporting the airlift of supplies to China in support of Generalissimo Chaing Kai Shek's Nationalists forces. Imphal was also the ideal location from which to launch a ground offensive to re-claim Burma. All that was needed was a commander to organize the preparations, unify the Allies efforts, provide a vision for victory, develop a plan, and inspire the forces.

## **THE MAKING OF A GREAT COMMANDER**

Great Commanders are unlike Athena, who sprung whole from Zeus' head. They are the result of education and experience, no matter how great their innate ability. Slim was no

different. Before examining his role in the 1944 campaign in Burma it is important to understand the experiences that shaped Slim.

William Slim was born into the lower middle class and was not from military stock. Nevertheless, he was fascinated with military life, joined the Officer Training Corps, and was subsequently commissioned in a Yeomanry battalion. Service in WW I included short stints at Galipolli and in Iraq with longer training tours in England and staff duty in India. After the war he received a commission in a Gurkha regiment and saw duty on India's Northwest Frontier. During the inter-war years he completed tours as a student in India and England, as an instructor at the Staff College at Camberly, and as the head of the India Army Senior Officer Course. He also served on the Indian Army Staff.

Slim began World War II as a colonel commanding a Gurkha battalion. He quickly rose to command a brigade then a division, corps, and finally an Army. Along the way he fought against the Italians in Somalia and Ethiopia, the Vichy French in Syria, the Iranians in Iran, and the Japanese in Burma. These experiences provided him a valuable learning experience and shaped how he planned the campaigns and fought the decisive battles in India and Burma in 1944.

As a brigade commander, he conducted Britain's first offensive in WW II. He was tasked to retake the Sudanese town of Gallabat from the Italians and to open an invasion route into Ethiopia by capturing the town of Metemma. The attack to capture Gallabat was successful, but his initial attempt to capture Metemma failed due to a lack of effective air-ground coordination. Slim's initial plan required the British air forces to only engage the Italian air forces in strength. However, the British air forces committed themselves piecemeal and were ineffective, conceding air superiority to the Italians. The Italians then delivered a devastating

aerial bombardment on Slim's brigade, which caused him to postpone his assault on Metemma until he could reorganize. Slim later learned that his seizure of Gallabat had caused the Italian forces in Metemma to panic. Had he immediately exploited his success at Gallabat the garrison at Metemma would most likely have been easily defeated.

Slim learned two vital lessons from his Sudanese – Ethiopian experience. First, there must be coordination between air and ground forces to achieve success. Second, he learned not to take counsels of his fears. He decided, in the future, to seize the initiative by taking bold chances, counting on the enemy force to be worse off than his.<sup>7</sup> He would effectively apply both of these lessons during the 1944 campaign in Burma.

Slim's next learning experience came as a division commander in charge of an offensive against the Vichy French in Syria. During his advance Slim was tasked to seize the town of Deir-ez-For. He developed a plan to fix the enemy frontally while sending a mobile force to envelop the city defenses. Success, he believed, relied on the premise that the appearance of a force behind the town would unnerve the French. However, the envelopment bogged down and he had to withdraw without gaining contact with the enemy. The attack had to be postponed. Slim's staff advised him they lacked the fuel to conduct the envelopment and therefore the attack would now have to be a frontal assault. After a moment of hesitation Slim disagreed and ordered another envelopment. He had his administrative officer<sup>8</sup> defuel all the vehicles not involved in the envelopment to provide sufficient fuel to mobilize the enveloping force. The gamble paid off. The envelopment was successful and the French fled.

From this experience, Slim's first insight was that logistics enable fire and maneuver and that it is the commander's responsibility to provide the logistics his subordinates require to fight. The second insight was that while he must listen to the advice of his staff, he was responsible for

deciding whether or not a plan was logically feasible.<sup>9</sup> A further benefit of this battle was the close working relationship and respect Slim developed for his Administrative Officer, Major General Snelling, then a lieutenant colonel. Snelling served Slim in the same capacity in the Fourteenth Army.<sup>10</sup>

Slim assumed command of Burma Corps on 13 March 1942 while it was engaged in a fighting withdrawal through Burma. Slim was responsible for both fighting the Japanese, attacking from the south, and maintaining contact with the Chinese allies on his eastern flank. He was unsure whether his specific task was to defend a portion of Burma, to delay the Japanese offensive for a period of time, or to withdraw his corps intact to India. The lack of a clear directive made it difficult for him to devise a plan of action and wrest the initiative from the Japanese.<sup>11</sup> The result was a series of unsuccessful engagements with the Japanese. Slim would stabilize his front and collect forces to attack to regain the initiative but would ultimately be forced to withdraw prior to striking due to either a Chinese retreat or the Japanese outmaneuvering his defenses. Finally, after a last engagement while withdrawing across the Chindwin River, the Burma Corps broke contact with the Japanese and successfully withdrew to the Imphal Plain in India.

Throughout the Allied withdrawal, Burma Corps' higher headquarters failed to provide the logistical support needed to decisively fight or successfully defend. Allied supply dumps and fuel farms were ordered destroyed before Slim's forces could utilize them. The worst came upon arrival at Imphal. No plan was in place to provide supplies, shelter, or equipment to help Burma Corps reconstitute. In fact, Burma Corps was received in Imphal with great disdain and neglect, despite having conducted the longest fighting withdrawal in British history.

In his book *Defeat into Victory*, Slim listed several lessons learned from Burma Corps' successful withdrawal. First, the failure in Burma was the result of the lack of preparation compounded by the separation of the administrative and operational command. Second, the side with air superiority had a distinct advantage in ability to move forces around the battlefield. Third, the Allies were poorly trained and ill equipped to fight in the jungle. This allowed the Japanese to capitalize on their training to envelop the Allied forces and cut their LOC.s. Fourth, the Japanese general was more confident, bolder, and more aggressive, to the point of foolhardiness. Fifth, the lack of strategic vision and an operational campaign plan for Burma made it impossible for the subordinate commanders to devise and execute a battle plan.<sup>12</sup>

Based on his lessons learned Slim formed impressions about the Japanese generals' weaknesses and devised the tactics to defeat them. He realized that the "Japanese, formidable as long as they are allowed to follow undisturbed their daring projects, are thrown into confusion by the unexpected."<sup>13</sup> Their enveloping movements were actually very slow and their success was really due to the British forces' inability to maintain forces in the jungle to detect and disrupt them. He noted that the Japanese commanders assumed great risk by attacking with a small margin of error in their logistical arrangement. He further noted Japanese willingness to stick to the plan and to commit all reserves and resources to make it successful, even after the plan had undoubtedly failed. This single-minded focus on the plan provided fanatical determination down to the lowest level but lacked the flexibility so vital in execution.<sup>14</sup>

Slim used this knowledge to devise the tactics to counter the Japanese. He determined that the best response was to envelop the enemy before they enveloped him, at the same time fixing the enemy with a simultaneous frontal attack. He would also arrange his forces in depth in order to counter the Japanese envelopment. To enable these tactics to be effective, he realized

every soldier, not just the infantry, must be trained to move and fight in the jungle. There would be no front lines. Slim also began developing the techniques to supply his forces by air in order to remove their reliance on roads for re-supply.<sup>15</sup>

After the withdrawal from Burma, Slim was assigned command of the 15<sup>th</sup> Corps. In this capacity he was responsible for establishing a training program at Ranchi, India to train the British forces in jungle warfare. The two precepts of his training were that the jungle was not impenetrable and that there were no front lines. This training program, over time, trained all the British soldiers that fought in Burma.

He also observed Major General Ord Wingate's first Special Force operation conducted in Burma in 1943. Special Force penetrated deep behind Japanese lines and disrupted their lines of communication. Special Force relied on aerial re-supply to enable them to move through the trackless jungle and to maintain a force behind enemy lines. Slim added Special Force's tactics and techniques to his own.<sup>16</sup>

Slim next got another chance to fight the Japanese. The British Eastern Army had launched a division-sized offensive in Arakan during the 1943-campaign season. The offensive bogged down and the army commander sent Slim to investigate. Slim found that the division commander and staff were too quick to label terrain as impenetrable and he felt that the division was being required to command and control too many brigades. He recommended that a corps headquarters be committed. The army commander incorrectly chose to ignore Slim's recommendations.

Soon thereafter, the Japanese launched an offensive and maneuvered through the "impenetrable terrain". The Japanese cut the British division into several pieces and threatened its destruction. The army commander took personal charge, but was unable to save the situation.

He then had Slim and his 15 Corps assume operational but not administrative control. Slim and a new division commander stabilized the situation by accepting that the offensive was a failure and withdrawing to more defensible terrain.

Slim learned and relearned many valuable lessons from this operation. First, especially in Burma, operational and administrative control needed to be invested in the same headquarters and a higher level headquarters was responsible for laying the foundation for battle more than actually fighting. Administrative preparation and execution were key to this. Secondly, there was a limit to how many subordinate formations a headquarters could command and control. A commander was responsible to organize his force to ensure his subordinates were not overwhelmed. Finally, he relearned that there was no such thing as impenetrable terrain and a commander pays a grave price if he ignores this faulty axiom.

Through these experiences Slim learned valuable lessons. His application of those lessons is readily apparent in his conduct of the battles of 1944. Before examining how he applied those lessons, we first need to gain an appreciation of the situation in which he was required to apply them.

## **SITUATION**

### **Japanese Strategy**

The Japanese invaded Burma in 1942 to gain control of its rice producing fields in the Irrawaddy Delta, to secure the oil fields in Yenangyaung, and to establish a geographic line they could defend. The offensive's main effort was to seize the Mandalay area and destroy the Chinese forces withdrawing to China. A secondary effort was to destroy Britain's Burma Corps while it was withdrawing to Imphal. By the time the 1942 monsoons began the Japanese had

seized all of Burma. They established a defensive line running from Upper Salween – Myitkyina – Kamaing – Kalewa – Gangaw and the Akyab Island and Tenasserim districts.<sup>17</sup> (see map 1)

Two events in 1943 changed the Japanese strategy for Burma--the first Special Force operation and a new more aggressive commander for 15<sup>th</sup> Army. During the 1943 campaign season Brigadier General Ord Wingate infiltrated behind Japanese lines in northern Burma and harassed the 15<sup>th</sup> Army's lines of communication. This led some Japanese commanders to conclude that their current defensive line was vulnerable and that the Allied base at Imphal was a major threat. The 15<sup>th</sup> Army's new commander, Lieutenant General Reyna Mutaguchi, aggressive by nature, decided he had to extend his defense of Burma west into India. The *Burma Area Army*'s commander, Lieutenant General Masakazu Kawabe, Mutaguchi's next higher commander, concurred.<sup>18</sup>

To refine the plan and answer questions regarding its feasibility, a series of war games were held. 15<sup>th</sup> Army held the critical one from 22-26 December 1943. The final recommendation *Burma Area Army* and *Southern Army* conveyed to the *Japanese Imperial General Headquarters (IG HQ)* was that it was necessary to seize Imphal and establish the new defensive line to the west, inside India. They also said they had also determined their plan to be feasible. On 7 January 1944 *IG HQ* gave its consent to the operation. As a result, *Burma Area Army* issued an order to 15<sup>th</sup> Army with the objective to “destroy the enemy at Imphal and establish strong defensive positions covering Kohima and Imphal before the coming rainy season.”<sup>19</sup> There were still lingering concerns regarding the logistic feasibility of the operation. Those concerned included the 15<sup>th</sup> Army Chief of Staff, the commander 33<sup>rd</sup> Division, and the logistic community.

Before describing the plan it will be beneficial to look at the Japanese order of battle.

The *Southern Army*, equivalent to S.E.A.C., was responsible for the defense of the southern part of the Japanese territory. The *Burma Area Army*, the 14<sup>th</sup> Army's counterpart, was responsible for the defense of Burma and initially contained two subordinate armies. The 28<sup>th</sup> Army was responsible for the defense of southern Burma. Northern Burma, to include Arakan, Imphal, Hukawng Valley, and the Salween River front, was the responsibility of the 15<sup>th</sup> Army. The 15<sup>th</sup> Army had six divisions – 15<sup>th</sup> (rushed to the theater and not complete for its offensive), 18<sup>th</sup>, 31<sup>st</sup>, 33<sup>rd</sup>, 55<sup>th</sup>, and 58<sup>th</sup>. At the height of the battles the 33<sup>rd</sup> Army was created and took over responsibility for the Hukawng Valley and Salween River fronts and was assigned the 18<sup>th</sup> and 56<sup>th</sup> divisions.

15<sup>th</sup> Army's plan was to attack Imphal, its main effort, with three divisions (15<sup>th</sup>, 31<sup>st</sup>, and 33<sup>rd</sup>) to seize a new defensive line to the west. Two to three weeks prior, the 55<sup>th</sup> Division would launch a limited offensive in Arakan to draw in the Allied reserves. The 18<sup>th</sup> Division's task was to defend in the Hukawng Valley front in the vicinity of Mogaung to hold off a possible enemy attack from Ledo. The 56<sup>th</sup> Division's task was to conduct a spoiling attack against the Chinese Yunnam forces and to seize the Salween River crossing to deny them to the enemy.

The plan to seize Imphal (see map 6) called for the 33<sup>rd</sup> Division (*rein*) to attack from the south and southeast to fix 4<sup>th</sup> Corps and cause it to commit its reserve; 15<sup>th</sup> Division (-), the main effort, to envelop Imphal from the north; and 31st Division to attack deep to seize Kohima and cut the only ground LOC. The divisions were to carry only twenty days of supply. Re-supply was to be accomplished by capturing Allied supply dumps and the opening of the road running through Imphal to Kohima.<sup>20</sup>

The Japanese plan was bold and risky. All the divisions were separated, and would take time to move to each other's support. The two divisions attacking to the north of Imphal had to leave behind most of their mechanical transport and heavy equipment. They were reliant upon a quick seizure of Imphal to open up a reasonable and reliable LOC. to ensure re-supply and to move their heavy equipment forward to join them. The main effort, *15<sup>th</sup> Division*, was still arriving after a long and exhaustive trip to the Chindwin River area and was not complete when it began its offensive. The Japanese leadership believed the risks were reasonable based on their impression of the Allied forces' fighting capability. They believed the Allied troops would break and run once their LOC.s were cut. They were also confident in the ability of the Japanese soldier to beat the Allied soldier in any engagement. The Allies' perfection of aerial re-supply demonstrated during the first Special Force operation and the quality of the Allied infantry, as demonstrated in engagements along the Chindwin River, did not seem to have been considerations in the Japanese planning.

### **Allied Strategy**

The Allied strategy for Burma was abysmal. To quote Lord Ismay, Churchill's military assistant, "When history comes to be written, I believe that the waffling that there has been for nearly nine months over the basic question of our strategy in the Far East will be one of the black spots in the record of British High Direction of War, which has, on the whole, been pretty good."<sup>21</sup> The main problem resulted from three divergent views—those of the U.S., the British Chiefs of Staff, and Winston Churchill. The second problem was S.E.A.C.'s low priority relative to the other Allied theaters.

The U.S. and Britain had different views on the India-China-Burma Theater. The U.S. saw India and the upper part of Burma as an essential route to provide supplies to Chaing Kai

Shek's Nationalist Chinese Forces. Chaing Kai Shek and his forces were tying down a large number of Japanese divisions and preventing them from being shifted to counter the U.S. thrust across the Pacific. Right or wrong, the U.S. consistently managed to make providing an air and ground link to China the Allied priority in Southeast Asia. Key to providing this aid was building a road from Ledo, India to Myitkyina, Burma to connect with an existing road into China. The U.S. saw operations in upper and central Burma as supporting efforts to protect the construction and operation of the road to China. The U.S. was unwilling to expend resources on any operation that did not further this objective, especially if, to them, it gave the appearance of reestablishing British imperialism.

The British on the other hand saw Burma, especially Southern Burma, as key to regaining lost possessions farther east. They were less concerned with propping up Chaing Kai Shek, whom they had found to be unreliable. However, there were divergent views in the British camp on operations in S.E.A.C. The Prime Minister wanted to bypass Burma altogether in favor of a bold amphibious operation directed against the Kra Isthmus or Sumatra, south of the Andaman and Nicobar Islands. He felt boldness was needed to ensure British forces could regain Singapore and participate in the final defeat of Japan. He felt it was essential for Britain to be in a strong position so as to help shape post war Asia. The British Chiefs of Staff felt that a direct thrust on Sumatra was too risky, especially since there would be no ground based aviation support and the British lacked the necessary battle fleet to counter the Japanese. They felt a more cautious advance by a series of smaller amphibious hooks was more realistic. The resulting debate caused confusion and wasted staff effort and time and delayed the vital decisions and directives.

The one shared opinion was that an overland advance to retake Burma was not feasible. This point of view was summed up in a 7 August 1943 document that read, “an overland advance in Burma from the north and west with Rangoon as the final objective is likely to be a protracted, costly and difficult operation, in which most of the cards will be in the enemy’s hands.”<sup>22</sup>

The directive that drove operations during the decisive battles in 1944 was the result of a number of conferences throughout 1942, 1943, and 1944. The Quadrant Conference held in Quebec in August 1943 established the Southeast Asia Command and appointed Mountbatten as the Supreme Commander, and Stilwell as his deputy. Quadrant assigned S.E.A.C. the mission “to maintain and broaden contact with China by air route and by establishing a land route, and engage the Japanese in the way best calculated to reduce their forces and to divert them from the Pacific.”<sup>23</sup> Quadrant also authorized the conduct of a second and much larger Special Force operation. This decision was the result of Wingate’s captivating presentation, Churchill’s ulterior political designs, and the U.S. Chiefs of Staff desire to see some limited offensive in Burma to assist the Ledo road construction.<sup>24</sup>

The long drawn-out debate over the strategy for Southeast Asia made it difficult for the theater commander and his subordinates to draw up plans – either long-term or short-term. The debate did establish the priority of Germany before Japan, Pacific before Southeast Asia, the road to China before the rest of Burma, and the controversial Special Force operation before either the Imphal or Arakan.

The directives issued, Mountbatten and his S.E.A.C. turned to develop a plan that accomplished the objectives. Mountbatten was aware of the differing Allied priorities and tried to strike a balance.<sup>25</sup> Mountbatten’s staff developed plans for seven operations for 1944 (see map 1):

1. Amphibious assault to capture the Andaman Islands in the Bay of Bengal, code named BUCANEER. S.E.A.C. also continued efforts on Churchill's bolder project to land in Sumatra, though Mountbatten preferred BUCANEER.
2. Advance in Arakan by 15<sup>th</sup> Corps to seize the Mayu Peninsula. This was a continuation of the failed offensive in 1943.
3. Overland advance across the Chindwin by 4<sup>th</sup> Corps.
4. Advance by Stilwell's N.C.A.C. to Myitkyina to cover the Ledo Road construction.
5. Special Force's long range penetration operation in upper Burma to support N.C.A.C.
6. An airborne assault to seize Rail Indaw to support N.C.A.C. and Special Force by severing the Japanese LOC. to northern Burma.
7. An offensive by the Chinese forces in Yunnam province to Laisho and Bhamo to support Ledo Road construction. This force was code named Yoke Force.<sup>26</sup>

These operations were based on the assumption that amphibious shipping and landing craft would be transferred from the Mediterranean, that sufficient air transport aircraft were available, and that Chaing Kai Shek would support.

The availability of amphibious shipping and landing craft was the first assumption to be violated. The Allies decided to retain the amphibious capabilities in Europe to support Operations OVERLORD and ANVIL. As a result, BUCANEER was delayed until after the 1944 monsoon season.<sup>27</sup> Chaing Kai Shek used the cancellation of the amphibious operation as a pretext to cancel the offensive by Yoke Force. Finally, detailed planning showed that there was not enough transport aircraft to support all the planned operations, especially since Mountbatten was restricted from diverting transport aircraft from the "hump", the air route used to support the Chinese Nationalist Army. The airborne assault on Rail Indaw was therefore canceled. This left

S.E.A.C. with N.C.A.C.’ offensive in support of the Ledo road, the Special Force operation in support of N.C.A.C., 4<sup>th</sup> Corps’ advance across the Chindwin River, and 15<sup>th</sup> Corps’ advance in Arakan. All of which were to fall under Slim’s operational control.<sup>28</sup>

### **Command Relations- Personalities**

A major problem that plagued S.E.A.C. was command relations, most of which were shifted onto Slim’s shoulders. Mountbatten was the Supreme Allied Commander with Stilwell as his deputy. The theater was designed around having subordinate air, land, and sea commanders for each of these battlespace mediums reporting to the Supreme Allied Commander. India was to provide forces, supplies and infrastructure to support S.E.A.C. The major problems in the command were created by the personalities of Stilwell and Wingate.

Originally, the plan was to have both 14<sup>th</sup> Army and N.C.A.C operating under 11<sup>th</sup> Army Group. However, this arrangement was unsatisfactory to Stilwell who had a dislike for Giffard and Mountbatten. Stilwell was in the unique position of simultaneously holding three positions. He was Mountbatten’s Deputy Supreme Allied Commander and therefore senior to Giffard. He was the commander of N.C.A.C. and as such should have reported to Giffard as an Army commander. He was also the Chief of Staff to Chaing Kai Shek and, as such, outside S.E.A.C.’s chain of command. Stilwell fought long and hard, shifting between his billets to maintain his independence. Slim, who was a silent observer to the critical meeting, had this to say of his performance: “To watch Stilwell, when hard pressed, shift his position from one of the several strong points he held by virtue of his numerous Allied, American, and Chinese offices, to another, was a lesson in the mobile offensive – defensive.”<sup>29</sup>

Just when it looked as if an impasse had been reached and Mountbatten would have to relieve Stilwell, Stilwell surprised everyone by saying he was willing to come under the

operational control of Slim. As Slim pointed out, this was a ludicrous arrangement because Stilwell was either an adjacent commander or a senior commander depending on which billet he occupied. However, Stilwell had formed a great respect for Slim during the withdrawal in 1942 and felt he was the only one for whom he could work. It says much about Slim's leadership that this arrangement was accepted and worked.

The other rogue element in S.E.A.C.'s chain of command was Wingate. Wingate, through his personal appeal, won support for his second Special Force operation from Winston Churchill and both the British and American Chiefs of Staff. Within the theater there were doubts about the efficacy of his long-range penetration operations, especially given the resources required to undertake it. Wingate also regularly demanded additional resources and higher priorities to support his endeavor. When he felt he was not getting the support he needed he threatened to contact the Prime Minister directly, a blank check Winston Churchill had written. Once again, it was to Slim that the hierarchy turned. Wingate and his Special Force were placed under Slim's operational control.

The affect of the preceding decisions meant that Slim was responsible for all land operations in S.E.A.C. for the 1944 campaign season. While he had direct and unquestionable command of his two Corps, he had more nebulous control over N.C.A.C. and the Special Force. It was a testament of Slim's ability as a leader that all concerned trusted him to make this relationship work.

### **THE TURNING POINT-- THE DECISIVE BATTLES**

The stage is now set to examine the battles and operations that wrested the initiative from the Japanese in S.E.A.C. While Burma Army's higher headquarters debated, Slim drew his own conclusions and began putting them into action. He felt that the construction of a road across

northern Burma to connect India to China was a waste of resources. He believed opening the traditional route from a southern Burma port though Mandalay then into China had a better chance of success, would provide for a greater quantity of supplies, and would be a better use of available resources.<sup>30</sup> He believed that the best means to accomplish this was by using amphibious forces. However, he came to the conclusion early on that S.E.A.C. would not be assigned the necessary amphibious craft. He therefore felt that an overland advance from Imphal to Mandalay then to Rangoon was the only feasible course of action.

Slim also had concerns about the feasibility of Wingate's Special Force operation. He believed that to be effective the Special Force long-range penetration operations had to be tied to and in support of a larger offensive. He was also leery of the size Special Force was growing to and the quality of the officers and enlisted it was demanding.

Despite his own reservations, Slim acknowledged that N.C.A.C.'s operations were the main effort and that Wingate and his Special Force had to be supported. However, Slim was still convinced that the decisive battles would be fought in the Imphal area because the *Burma Area Army* was unlikely to let N.C.A.C. and Special Force operations go unchallenged. No operation would be safe until the *Burma Area Army* was defeated. The *Burma Area Army* was a potent force and Slim knew it would have to be seriously weakened before the Allies "plunged into Burma."<sup>31</sup> Therefore, while planning to support N.C.A.C. and Arakan, Slim continued to focus on drawing the *Burma Area Army* into a decisive battle in the Imphal plain where he could use his mechanized advantage to deliver a crippling blow. Once he had weakened the *Burma Area Army* he could go on the offensive into central and southern Burma.

I now propose to examine each of the operations and battles separately. I will describe the plan, provide a synopsis of what happened, and conclude with an analysis of how Slim's

generalship influenced the outcome. I will start with N.C.A.C. move to the Special Force then Arakan and finish with Imphal. Though each one will be looked at individually, the reader should bear in mind they took place concurrently.

### **Northern Combat Area Command** (see map 2)

As has already been noted, in order to forestall a rift in the Allied command structure, Stilwell agreed to come under the operational control of Slim until N.C.A.C. reached the city of Kamaing. On 10 January 1944 Slim issued his first directive to Stilwell. The directive confirmed the plan already agreed to in previous conferences and was in line with Stilwell's desires. Slim tasked N.C.A.C. to advance his Chinese – American force on the general axis of Shingbwiyang – Kamaing – Mogaung – Myitkyina. This directive also informed Stilwell that the Special Force's operation would be in support of his advance.<sup>32</sup>

Stilwell advanced steadily towards Myitkyina by way of the Hukawng Valley. He forced the *18<sup>th</sup> Division* out of successive defensive positions by fixing them with a frontal attack while simultaneously sending a force through the jungle to envelop them and cut their LOC. and withdrawal route. The enemy managed, barely, to extricate itself from these traps and was forced steadily back. Special Force, for a period of time, successfully cut the LOC. to *18<sup>th</sup> Division* forcing it to consume its vital stockpiled supplies and depriving it of reinforcements. Unfortunately, the Special Force "block" was removed at a critical moment and allowed the Japanese to send supplies and troops to Myitkyina.

The climax of the operation came at the Battle for Myitkyina. In a surprise move, Stilwell conducted a deep envelopment and seized the Myitkyina airfield on 17 May 1944. He then flew in a Chinese division to reinforce. An attack was then launched to seize Myitkyina and the vital supplies stockpiled there. The attack failed and Stilwell's forces bogged down in a

battle of attrition that allowed the Japanese time to first reinforce then withdraw. Myitkyina was finally captured on 3 August 1944 ending operations in the sector for 1944.<sup>33</sup>

Slim exerted very little direct control over Stilwell. On two occasions he was required to exert his influence. The first was just after the 15<sup>th</sup> Army launched its offensive against Imphal and 4<sup>th</sup> Corps was hard pressed and Dimapur was threatened. Stilwell and Slim met at Jorhat on 3 April 1944 to discuss the situation. At this meeting Stilwell offered Slim his best Chinese division. Both knew that this meant Stilwell's offensive would have to be postponed until after the 1944 monsoon season. Slim refused the offer and promised Stilwell that his LOC. through Dimapur would be cut for no more than ten days.

The second occasion was caused by Stilwell's dissatisfaction with Special Force's performance. Stilwell and the Special Force commander, Brigadier General Letaigne, were not even speaking. Mountbatten asked Slim to meet with both and work things out, even though by this time Stilwell was no longer under Slim's operational control. Slim discovered that Special Force was a spent force and he brokered a deal with Stilwell for their relief and flight out to India.<sup>34</sup>

In leading Stilwell, Slim demonstrated that the great commander must have the courage to leave his subordinates alone. Slim realized that Stilwell was a fire-eater and needed no encouragement to aggressively engage the Japanese. All he needed to do was support Stilwell. Through his leadership, Slim earned Stilwell's trust and respect. In testament to this respect, Slim was the only person Stilwell confided in and sought advice from regarding his bold move to seize Myitkyina.<sup>35</sup> The best description of Slim and Stilwell's relationship was given by Slim and occurred at the meeting where Stilwell moved from Slim's control back to Mountbatten's. Stilwell began the conversation, "Well, General, I've been a good subordinate to you. I've

obeyed all your orders!” Slim responded, “Yes, you old devil, but only because the few I did give you were the only ones you wanted!”<sup>36</sup>

### **Special Force**

The most difficult leadership challenge Slim faced was, without question, Major General Wingate. Wingate was a visionary and had a talent for organization, but he lacked a sense of what was feasible and how his operations supported the larger scheme. His threats to go directly to the Prime Minister or to resign, unless his increasingly unrealistic demands were met, constantly precipitated crises in 14<sup>th</sup> Army and S.E.A.C. His actions were even more irritating to his seniors because of the priority of support he was already receiving.

As originally briefed and approved by the Chiefs of Staff and Churchill, Special Force was intended to be three to five lightly equipped brigades that would penetrate behind enemy lines to harass and interdict Japanese LOC.s. The brigades were not to occupy fixed locations but instead rely on mobility. Re-supply was to be conducted by airdrop and by constructing temporary airfields in remote jungle locations. As preparations proceeded Wingate evolved his concept to include establishing semi-permanent strongholds from which Special Force columns could operate. These strongholds would be located in remote areas and contain airfields and supply dumps. Occasionally, once the enemy located them, they would be abandoned and new one's created.

Giffard assigned responsibility for the employment of Special Force to Slim, telling him he “had to best decide on how to best employ the long range penetration brigades of the Special Force.”<sup>37</sup> Slim, keeping in mind that N.C.A.C. was the main effort, decided at a 3 January 1944 conference that Special Force’s role would be to “assist Stilwell’s advance on the northern front and afford a favorable opportunity both for the Chinese Yunnam armies to advance and

exploitation by 4<sup>th</sup> Corps; of these tasks the most important was to assist Stilwell.<sup>38</sup> On 9 January 1944, 14<sup>th</sup> Army and Eastern Air Command issued a joint directive to Special Force directing the above actions.

Wingate did not like this directive and sent a letter protesting it to Giffard, bypassing Slim. Wingate thought N.C.A.C. should be supporting Special Force and that his brigades would be worn down and wasted. Wingate was also upset that Slim would not provide the additional four battalions Wingate demanded. Giffard relied on Slim to set Wingate straight. In fact, Slim had already decided to supply some of what Wingate asked. Slim also reiterated that Special Force's primary task was to support N.C.A.C. This crisis was just one of the many Wingate needlessly precipitated.

Wingate's plan called for Special Force to infiltrate by foot and glider into the Indaw area to cut the Japanese LOC. to Northern Burma (see maps 1 and 5). He had one brigade, 16<sup>th</sup> under Brigadier General B. E. Ferguson, march overland from Ledo and two brigades, the 77<sup>th</sup> and 111<sup>th</sup>, infiltrate by glider. The remaining two brigades, the 14<sup>th</sup> and 23<sup>rd</sup>, were initially in reserve. His plan was either to relieve the committed brigades with the reserve brigades and continue operations through the monsoon or to withdraw the entire force before the monsoon. The decision would depend on how operations went.

The infiltration went well with one change. One of the initial landing zones was fouled and a brigade was shifted to fly into the same zone with 111<sup>th</sup> Bde. A dilemma, described below, which demonstrated the classic "Wingate" challenge. After insertion Wingate had his brigades moving back and forth attacking supply dumps and cutting the vital railroad LOC. He regularly changed a brigade's mission, often without informing the other brigades. At one point he ordered Brigadier General W. D. A. Lentaigne to attack the city of Indaw with his 111<sup>th</sup> Brigade

and promised to have the 14<sup>th</sup> Brigade link up and support. Soon after making this commitment, Wingate changed 14<sup>th</sup> Brigades mission but neglected to inform Lentaigne. Lentaigne conducted a long arduous approach march to find 14<sup>th</sup> Brigade was not present and he was forced to attack alone. Predictably, due to a lack of combat power, the attack failed. Incidents like this were common and prompted one of Wingate's brigade commanders to comment after the war that Wingate "often seemed to forget the difference between what he had planned and communicated to his staff and what he had thought and not indulged."<sup>39</sup>

Wingate then hit upon the idea that he should shift his focus from supporting N.C.A.C. to assisting 4<sup>th</sup> Corps at Imphal. This change of mission was contrary to his orders. On two occasions Slim personally ordered him to keep his focus on N.C.A.C. Despite this, at the time of his death, he was repositioning brigades to support the Battle of Imphal vice N.C.A.C.<sup>40</sup>

After Wingate's death, Slim appointed Lentaigne to command Special Force. He reiterated that Special Force was to support N.C.A.C. and not 4<sup>th</sup> Corps. Lentaigne got the message and concentrated his brigades to better support Stilwell. To provide better support Slim even passed control of Special Force to Stilwell. Unfortunately, by this time, the brigades were exhausted from wasted movement and casualties and were never able to satisfy Stilwell's orders to sever the Japanese LOC.

Slim's leadership was definitely tested by Wingate. On one occasion Wingate threatened to go directly to the Prime Minister if Slim did not concede to his demands. Slim called his bluff and handed him a message pad. Wingate relented.<sup>41</sup> On another occasion Wingate refused to execute Slim's directive. Slim told him to take the order, consider it, and return in the morning. If he still refused it, Slim told him, while he had never had anyone refuse an order before, he

knew what to do if Wingate did. The threat of relief was more than implied. The next morning, with Giffard present, Wingate accepted the order.<sup>42</sup>

As referenced above, the most enlightening incident occurred on 5 March 1944 over a last minute decision to either execute or abort the fly in. An hour before takeoff an aerial photo revealed that one of the landing zones was obstructed by logs. According to Slim, Wingate became agitated and hysterical, claiming the whole operation had to be canceled because the Japanese were undoubtedly waiting to ambush the force at the other landing zones. Slim disagreed and pointed out that the fouled LZ was one used during the first Special Force operation and it was reasonable to expect that the Japanese had obstructed it as a result of that operation. Wingate then deferred to Slim the decision as to whether to execute the fly-in or not. Slim authorized the fly-in, which went well. After the fact, Wingate wrote an article that reversed his role with Slim's.<sup>43</sup>

There is still controversy over whose story to believe – Slim's or Wingate's. Everything we know about the character of these two generals indicates that Slim was the calm stabilizing force and Wingate was the erratic volatile force. A number of observers of Slim during this period commented on his ability to calmly assess a situation, no matter how bad, and issue clear concise orders. The British Official History, normally a very objective source, is full of quotes commenting on Wingate's erratic personality. I believe Slim made the decision because it was in keeping with his personality.

Wingate's erratic genius, ultimatums, and bypassing the chain of command made him a difficult subordinate. His failure to see how his operations fit into the larger context often made him dangerous. It is doubtful there was another commander in the British Army capable of leading Wingate as well as Slim did.

Just prior to Wingate's death Slim made a critical decision on the employment of Special Force. He was confronted with two problems. The first was whether to fly in the second wave to reinforce or relieve the first wave. The second was whether to change the objective from helping N.C.A.C. to 4<sup>th</sup> Corps at Imphal. In the end Slim decided to adhere to his original plan and send in the second wave to reinforce and to maintain the focus on N.C.A.C. It says much about Slim's character that in his memoirs he says that maintaining the focus on N.C.A.C. was the wrong decision. He claimed that he should have concentrated all available strength at the decisive point, Imphal. He equated his decision to the same stubbornness that the Japanese commanders were prone to, persisting to a plan that should be changed.<sup>44</sup>

It is difficult to argue with a commander who criticizes his own decision. However, it must be kept in mind that the theater's main effort was, right or wrong, N.C.A.C. and that Slim had promised Stilwell that Special Force would cut the LOC. to the 18<sup>th</sup> Division. To have switched Special Force's focus at that time would have undermined an adjacent/subordinate commander's offensive and possibly jeopardized the main effort's success.

In hindsight the decision to refocus Special Force would also be seen as bad. 14<sup>th</sup> Army soundly defeated 15<sup>th</sup> Army's attack on Imphal without the change. Also, Special Force did in fact assist 14<sup>th</sup> Army because it cut the LOC. being used to supply the Japanese 15<sup>th</sup> and 31st divisions.

Before leaving Special Force we need to consider what effect it had from the Japanese perspective. It has been mentioned that the 1943 Special Force operation was instrumental in causing the Japanese leadership to conduct an offensive to seize Imphal. Since Slim's crippling of *Burma Area Army* was based on fighting a defensive battle at Imphal, it would appear, in

hindsight, that the first Special Force operation was instrumental in setting the conditions for the battle.

The 1944 Special Force operation also had a positive impact on the Battles of Imphal. It prevented the *15<sup>th</sup> Army's* headquarters ability to position itself to command and control the attack on Imphal, which caused coordination problems with its division. Special Force severed the LOC used to supply the *15<sup>th</sup>* and *31st* divisions, causing severe supply shortages. Elements of *15<sup>th</sup> Division* and all of *Burma Area Army's* reserve division, *53<sup>rd</sup> Division*, were committed to dealing with Special Force and therefore could not be used to reinforce other sectors. This was particularly devastating to *15<sup>th</sup> Division* in its attack on Imphal since it was already exhausted and under-strength before the offensive began. Lastly, *5<sup>th</sup> Air Division's* support to the attack on Imphal was degraded by its requirement to attack by Special Force.<sup>45</sup> In the final analysis, Special Force had a significant impact on the Battle of Imphal.

### **Arakan** (see maps 3 and 4)

If you recall, the Japanese plan for its 1944 offensive called for their *55<sup>th</sup> Division* in Arakan to launch an offensive two to three weeks prior to the Imphal offensive. The object of this offensive was to draw in *14<sup>th</sup> Army's* reserves prior to the Imphal offensive beginning. Prior to commencing the offensive the *55<sup>th</sup> Division* was defending along the line running from Maungdaw to Buthidaung.<sup>46</sup>

Lieutenant General Giffard's 9 January 1944 directive to Slim tasked him "to secure the mouth of the Naf River, Maungdaw, and Buthidaung as soon as possible and to exploit success to the maximum."<sup>47</sup> This was to be a limited offensive to contain enemy forces in the Arakan area and to regain territory lost in the 1943 campaign season.

The 1944 operation took place on the Mayu Peninsula, in the Mayu River Valley, and in the Kaladan River Valley. The objective area was broken into three sub-areas. The first was the coastal plain along the Bay of Bengal which was dominated by the Naf River and the numerous streams and swamps. There was one main road running from north to south, which was the primary ground LOC. in the Arakan area. The coastal plain was separated from the Mayu River Valley by the Mayu Mountain Range, which rose precipitously to a “Knife Edge” crest. There were limited passes across the mountain range. The main ones, capable of accommodating vehicles, were Goppe Pass, Ngakyedauk Pass, and the Maungdaw-Buthidaung Pass, which was the best containing an all weather road. The remaining passes were only suited for foot movement. At the beginning of the British offensive, the Maungdaw-Buthidaung pass was in Japanese hands.

The next sub-area was the Mayu River Valley. It was bordered on the west by the Mayu Range, split down the middle by the Mayu River, and bordered on the east by a high range of jungle clad hills. The main geographic locations were the villages along the Mayu River to include Goppe Bazar, Taung Bazar, and Buthidaung. Goppe Bazar and Taung Bazar were both administrative points supporting British forces in the Mayu River Valley area.

The last area was the Kaladan River Valley. It was separated from the Mayu River Valley by a range of jungle clad hills with only few foot capable tracks connecting the two. Its value was derived from its position on the flank of the main operating areas. The Kaladan River also terminated near the end of the Mayu Peninsula and Akyab Island and provided a third converging route aimed at the main Japanese defenses. The areas major disadvantage was its isolation from the main ground supply line in the coastal area. This required the forces operating in the Kaladan River Valley to be supplied solely by airdrops.

The Allied force in Arakan was the 15<sup>th</sup> Corps commanded by Lieutenant General A. F. P. Christeson. Christeson had succeeded Slim when Slim assumed command of the 14<sup>th</sup> Army. Christeson began his offensive with the 5<sup>th</sup>, 7<sup>th</sup>, and 81st West African Divisions.<sup>48</sup> As the battle proceeded the 25<sup>th</sup> and 36<sup>th</sup> Divisions reinforced him and the 26<sup>th</sup> Division was sent in to compensate for the transfer of the 5<sup>th</sup> and 7<sup>th</sup> Divisions when they were sent to Imphal during March. This meant Christeson began the battle with three divisions and concluded with four.

Christeson's plan was to attack with 5<sup>th</sup> Division in coastal area, the 7<sup>th</sup> Division in the Mayu River area, and the 81st West African Division in the Kaladan River area to protect the corps' eastern flank. The 5<sup>th</sup> Division's objectives were the Razabil fortress and the port of Maungdaw. The 7<sup>th</sup> Division's objectives were the fortress at Letwedet and the river port of Buthidaung. With these objectives captured 15<sup>th</sup> Corps would be able to use the all weather road running from Maungdaw to Buthidaung. If successful, 15<sup>th</sup> Corps was to exploit by continuing to seize the Mayu Peninsula and if possible to seize Akyab Island.

The Japanese offensive commenced on 4 February 1944. A Japanese column infiltrated through British lines along the eastern edge of the Mayu River Valley and attacked through Taung Bazar (see map 4). The column then divided with one element crossing the Mayu Range and cutting the coastal road in the vicinity of Briasco Bridge; one element attacked south along the Mayu River; and the main element attacked south, overran the 7<sup>th</sup> Division's command post and laid siege to the division's "admin box" at Sinzweya. The remainder of the 55<sup>th</sup> Division stepped up the intensity of its defense of Razabil and Letwedet fortresses and Buthidaung to fix 15<sup>th</sup> Corps' brigades already in action. A smaller force attacked the 81st West African Division in the Kaladan River Valley. The Japanese hoped that by cutting the British LOC.s they would cause them to retreat like they had in the 1943 Arakan offensive.

Even though the 15<sup>th</sup> Corps anticipated the offensive the ferocity, size, and depth of the infiltrating force caught them off guard. The gravest threat was to 7<sup>th</sup> Division's "admin box" at Sinzweya where the division command post took refuge. The battle turned into fierce close in fights for key terrain throughout the area. However, this was not to be a repeat of 1943 disaster. The British forces stood their ground and defeated every Japanese thrust, except in the Kaladan valley. The Japanese, realizing their initial stroke had culminated, conducted a second infiltration attack from Htindaw to try and linkup and reinforce their main effort attacking the "admin box". The British kept the forces from linking up but did lose control of the Maungdaw – Buthidaung Pass, especially the key points of east and west tunnel and point 551.

On 11 February 1944 Slim realized the Japanese plans had miscarried and ordered 15<sup>th</sup> Corps to assume the offensive. The remainder of the battle involved fierce fighting to root out dug in Japanese forces. During the battle Slim transferred the 5<sup>th</sup> and 7<sup>th</sup> Divisions, his most experienced, to Imphal and replaced them with two new ones.<sup>49</sup> 15<sup>th</sup> Corps' success was based on thorough training, leadership, rapid reinforcement, and aerial supply, all of which bear Slim's imprint.

After the 1942 withdrawal Slim had been appointed to command 15<sup>th</sup> Corps. While in this job he had established a jungle training center at Ranchi. The jungle training concentrated on making every soldier, not just infantry, proficient at moving and fighting in the jungle. Every clerk and radioman had to qualify on every weapon and had to learn the basics of local defense and patrolling. The training emphasized that there was a no front line in the jungle and therefore everyone was a combatant. After assuming command in Arakan, Slim had imbued in its divisions his philosophies on beating the Japanese. The most important one was that if a Japanese force infiltrated behind British lines to sever British LOC.s it was the Japanese force

not the British force that was cut off. Slim also trained the 15<sup>th</sup> Corps staff to peak efficiency. His training of the individual soldier and 15<sup>th</sup> Corps' staff gave the corps the confidence it needed to stand and fight vice panic at the initial Japanese success.

Slim's rapid reinforcement of 15<sup>th</sup> Corps was instrumental. Slim immediately ordered his army reserve, 26<sup>th</sup> Division, to move to the Arakan area. He also coordinated with 11<sup>th</sup> Army Group to send a second division, the 36<sup>th</sup>, to Arakan area in case it was needed. Christeson used his reinforcements to protect his vulnerable LOC. back to India, to free up the 5<sup>th</sup> and 7<sup>th</sup> Divisions to counterattack, and to provide fresh divisions to exploit success. Slim's quick decision to commit his reserves provided Christeson the combat power to create mobile forces to counterattack the Japanese penetrations.

After the initial Japanese success there were many who thought 15<sup>th</sup> Corps was already defeated and had to withdraw. They saw the Japanese cutting of the coastal LOC. as decisive. Slim remained calm and refused to be pressured into a rash act. Early on he divined that the Japanese had failed to break 15<sup>th</sup> Corps and, as a result, were vulnerable. He ordered the resumption of the offense when most people, mainly outside the area of operations, were still concerned about defeat. Slim's refusal to be pressured into withdrawing and his decision to assume the offense made the resulting exploitation and capture of the entire Mayu Peninsula and Akyab Island possible.

The critical enabler for these actions was aerial supply. Without supplies the British forces would have had to withdraw. Slim had been convinced that supplying forces by air was feasible ever since his withdrawal in 1942. He had also learned valuable lessons from the first Special Force operation in 1943. In anticipation that the 1944 battles would rely heavily on this technique Slim had his staff in coordination with the counterpart air staff work out the techniques

and procedures for aerial supplying entire corps. One of the challenges that had to be overcome was a lack of parachutes, which were dedicated to the European Theater. Slim and his staff developed a substitute out of jute, a paper product.<sup>50</sup> They also went to great lengths to organize the staging and packaging of supplies. In execution the airdrop provided everything the soldiers needed from ammunition and water to razors. The airdrops became so efficient that luxury items were regularly included and specialty orders were filled in a few hours. The success of the airdrops provided the soldiers the confidence they needed to hold their ground and defeat the Japanese.

Slim's success at Arakan became his pattern for victory throughout the rest of the war. All the great ideas and tactics that had been developed during the years of defeat were tested and refined. Most importantly it demonstrated conclusively to the Allied soldier that the Japanese were not invincible and that the Allies were more than the Japanese's equal. The stage was now set for the destruction of the *15<sup>th</sup> Army*, the main combat power of the *Burma Area Army*.

### **Imphal**

The battle of Imphal, which lasted from March to October 1944, was a decisive victory for Slim. The *Japanese 15<sup>th</sup> Army* was destroyed, its three divisions each incurring a minimum of 65% casualties, mostly deaths. The *Burma Area Army* was crippled and was unable to recover before 14<sup>th</sup> Army commenced its offensive to re-claim Burma during the 1945 campaign season. The battle itself was a classic. 14<sup>th</sup> Army, initially caught off guard with divisions too far forward, defeated the *15<sup>th</sup> Army* in a defensive fight centered around the Imphal Plain. It then assumed the offense and conducted one of the greatest pursuits of all times. The battle unfolded as Slim expected and achieved the objective he set for it – the weakening of the Japanese forces in Burma to set the conditions for assuming the offense.

The Imphal Plain is located in the Assam area of India along the border with Burma (see map 1). In 1944 it was isolated with only one all-weather road connecting it to the rest of India. The road began at the rail and road center of Dimapur and wound through jungle covered hills. About half way to Imphal it passed through the town of Kohima. After Kohima it climbed through the hills, crossing several precipitous and easily defended ridgelines, until it descended to the Imphal Plain.

The Imphal Plain was the only area of flat ground along the mountainous India-Burma border. This made the plain the only suitable area to construct airfields, stockpile supplies, and billet large number of troops. Because of these qualities it was the ideal location from which to stage and launch offensives into Burma.<sup>51</sup>

From Imphal there were two routes to the Chindwin River and Burma (see map 5). One route left the plain at its southern end. It then proceeded through the towns of Tiddim, Fort White, and Kalemyo before ending at the town of Kalewa on the Chindwin River. This route was called the Tiddim road. The other route exited the plain to the southeast and proceeded to Palel, crossed the Shenam Pass, and then to Tamu. At Tamu the route split. One could either continue east to the town of Sittaung on the Chindwin River or turn south down the Kabaw Valley to Kalemyo where it joined the Tiddim Road. The stretch to Tamu was called the Palel – Tamu Road.

S.E.A.C.'s directives for operations in the Imphal area tasked 14<sup>th</sup> Army to contain and divert Japanese forces by gaining control of the area south of Imphal-Tamu road and west of the Chindwin River and to exploit east of the Chindwin River to support Special Force. In accomplishing this task Slim also saw an opportunity to draw the Japanese into a decisive battle on ground favorable to the 14<sup>th</sup> Army in order to severely weaken the *Burma Area Army*. He

decided to fight the battle in the Imphal Plain because he could stockpile supplies, use his mechanized and armor advantage, utilize its airfields for re-supply and evacuation, and use the roads leading from it to the Chindwin River to pursue and complete the destruction of the attacking Japanese force. The disadvantage to Imphal was the single all weather ground LOC. which ran through Kohima to Dimapur and connected it to the main bases and supply dumps of Eastern India. Slim felt the risk was reasonable because he anticipated the Japanese could only send a single regiment to attack towards either Kohima or Dimapur. He expected the Japanese offensive to begin on 15 March 1944.

At Imphal Slim had 4<sup>th</sup> Corps commanded by Lieutenant General G. A. P. Scoones. Scoones had three divisions available at the start of the battle – 17<sup>th</sup>, 20<sup>th</sup>, and 23<sup>rd</sup> (see map 6). The 17<sup>th</sup> Division was deployed on the Tiddim Road in the vicinity of Tiddim. The 20<sup>th</sup> Division was deployed in the Tamu –Sittaung area. The 23<sup>rd</sup> Division was in reserve at Imphal. The two forward divisions were in contact with the enemy and were improving the roads leading to the Chindwin River.<sup>52</sup>

Slim considered three options for how he could fight the battle:

1. To anticipate the enemy offensive by crossing the Chindwin River and attacking him first.
2. To hold the Japanese 33<sup>rd</sup> *Division* in the Tiddim area and fight with all available forces on the line of the Chindwin, hoping to destroy the enemy as he crossed the river, with part of his forces on each bank.
3. To concentrate 4<sup>th</sup> Corps in the Imphal Plain and fight the battles there on ground of his choosing.<sup>53</sup>

Slim disregarded option one because the enemy could too easily mass and sustain superior numbers, he would have a dangerous river crossing to his back, and he would be at the end of a long LOC. He discarded option two because he would have a long vulnerable LOC. and he did not think it would garner decisive results. He chose option three. Option three allowed him to concentrate 4<sup>th</sup> Corps, it gave him a good LOC., it required the enemy to win the battle before the monsoon season or be stranded on a bad LOC. and unable to sustain his forces, and it provided him good all-weather airfields. His one concern was that this plan started a decisive battle with a withdrawal. He felt the risk was worth it because he was confident his troops would know the withdrawal was intended to draw in and defeat the enemy and not an attempt to avoid destruction.<sup>54</sup> This plan also allowed him to maximize his combat power by concentrating his administrative troops into strong points and to evacuate noncombatants and nonessential personnel for the duration of the battle.

The conduct of the battle is complex and it is not the intent to try and recount it in detail here. The following paragraphs provide a synopsis of the key actions and decisions. This will be followed by an examination of Slim's impact on the battle's outcome.<sup>55</sup>

The 15<sup>th</sup> Army's offensive started earlier and struck deeper and in greater strength than Slim anticipated (see map 6). The 33<sup>rd</sup> Division (*Rein*) began its attack on 8 March. The division (-) maneuvered to attack up the Tiddim road. One element attacked frontally to fix the 17<sup>th</sup> Division while other elements conducted an envelopment by maneuvering to the west of the road then attacked east to cut the road and 17<sup>th</sup> Division into several pieces. *Yamamoto Force*, a detachment of the 33<sup>rd</sup> Division, attacked up the Kabaw Valley to Tamu then turned west to Palel. The 15<sup>th</sup> Division (-) crossed the Chindwin in the vicinity of Thaungdut then passed south of Ukhru to attack Imphal from the north, severing the Imphal Kohima road en route. The 31st

*Division* crossed the Chindwin near Homalin and Tamanthi and converged on Kohima. On the way its southern element got embroiled in a fierce fight with 50<sup>th</sup> Parachute Brigade at Ukhru. The plan called for 33<sup>rd</sup> *Division*, attacking first, to draw in 4<sup>th</sup> Corps reserve; 15<sup>th</sup> *Division* to quickly seize Imphal opening the LOC.; and 31<sup>st</sup> *Division* to cut the LOC. and to protect the northern flank. All three divisions, after re-supplying, were to continue the attack west to seize a line running from Dimapur to Silchar.

The best way to examine the battles is to use Slim's own construct of concentration, attrition, counteroffensive, and pursuit, which he uses in his book Defeat Into Victory.

### Concentration

In the initial assault 4<sup>th</sup> Corps' two divisions were caught too far forward. The 17<sup>th</sup> Division was attacked first and was caught spread out. The 33<sup>rd</sup> *Division* managed to cut the 17<sup>th</sup> into multiple segments and block its withdrawal route to Imphal. Scoones had to commit his reserve to open up the Tiddim Road to allow 17<sup>th</sup> Division to withdraw. After heavy fighting the 17<sup>th</sup> Division successfully consolidated and withdrew to the Bishenpur area at the southern end of the Imphal Plain. The 20<sup>th</sup> Division, given warning by the 17<sup>th</sup> Division's plight, superbly executed its planned withdrawal through Palel to prepared positions in the Shenam Pass.

On the northern front Scoones sent the 50<sup>th</sup> Parachute Brigade, provided early on by 14<sup>th</sup> Army, to occupy positions at the communications center in the Ukhru area. This action delayed the advance of the 15<sup>th</sup> *Division* and the southern element of the 31<sup>st</sup> *Division*. Though forced to withdraw, the 50<sup>th</sup> Parachute Brigade kept the 15<sup>th</sup> *Division* from the Imphal Plain until the lead elements of the 5<sup>th</sup> Division could be flown in from Arakan to take up defensive positions and defeat this thrust on the edge of the plain. Elements of the 15<sup>th</sup> *Division* did manage to reach and cut the Imphal – Kohima Road just north of Imphal.

The *31st Division*'s attack on Kohima took longer to develop because of the distances it had to travel. However, its attack on Kohima turned out to be the gravest threat because the Allies thought its ultimate objective was vital communications center at Dimapur. Slim quickly organized a scratch garrison to hold Kohima and sent *5<sup>th</sup> Division*'s 161 Brigade to secure Dimapur. Kohima was besieged and Dimapur became the staging area for its relief and to re-open the road.

Slim was quick to reinforce the Imphal area. He sent the *5<sup>th</sup> Division* (-) by air to Imphal and its 161 Brigade by air to Dimapur. He also made arrangements to transfer the *7<sup>th</sup> Division* from Arakan to Dimapur. When he was provided 33 Corps Headquarters and *2<sup>nd</sup> British Division* he decided to concentrate them at Dimapur. He tasked its commander, Lieutenant General M. G. N. Stopford, to protect Dimapur, relieve Kohima, open the Kohima – Imphal Road, protect the Silchar – Bishenpur track, and to assume control of the Lushai Brigade operating in the Chin Hills south of Tiddim.

#### Attrition

As the four fronts – Bishenpur, Shenam Pass, Ukhrul, and Kohima stabilized and the reinforcements began to arrive and began their operations, a fierce battle raged in every location as both sides fought to gain the upper hand.

In a grueling series of engagements in the Bishenpur Area, *17<sup>th</sup> Division* held off the *33<sup>rd</sup> Division*. The *20<sup>th</sup> Division* successfully defended the Shenam Pass. The *23<sup>rd</sup>* and *5<sup>th</sup> Divisions* stopped the *15th Division* just north of the Imphal Plain in a series of fierce fights for key mountain peaks. In the Kohima area, the Kohima garrison barely held on to a much reduced perimeter while 33 Corps began to attack with *2<sup>nd</sup> British Division* and *7<sup>th</sup> Division* to relieve the siege.

Slim, realizing he had over tasked 33 Corps, reorganized his forces. He brought in the Special Services Brigade made up of Royal Marines to assume responsibility for the Silchar – Bishenpur track. He then assigned Special Services Brigade and the Lushai Brigade directly to Army Headquarters. This allowed 33 Corps to focus on Kohima and re-opening the Imphal-Kohima road.

### Counteroffensive (see map 7)

As the 14<sup>th</sup> Army began to gain the upper hand it ordered its corps to begin attacks to regain key terrain, open LOC.s, and destroy the enemy. 20<sup>th</sup> Division attacked towards Ukhru to cut 15<sup>th</sup> Division and 31st Divisions' LOC. 33 Corps retook Kohima. It then attacked south with 2<sup>nd</sup> British Division to clear the Imphal – Kohima Road and the 7<sup>th</sup> Division towards Ukhru. The 5<sup>th</sup> Division attacked north up the Imphal- Kohima Road and to link up with 33 Corps. Finally, 17<sup>th</sup> Division attacked south down the Tiddim road to Torbung.

### Pursuit

On 8 July the 15<sup>th</sup> Army commander finally admitted defeat and ordered a withdrawal. He had waited too long. His divisions, especially the 15<sup>th</sup> and 31st, were decimated and literally starving to death. The monsoon had set in, adding disease and impassable roads to the equation. The 14<sup>th</sup> Army, using their previously built roads and aerial supply, launched its pursuit. The 15<sup>th</sup> Army disintegrated losing about 75% of its force before it reached the Chindwin River. 33 Corps, 4<sup>th</sup> Corps having been flown to India to rest, pushed the pursuit to the Chindwin River and seized bridgeheads on its eastern bank in preparation for continuing the offensive after the monsoon season.

## Imphal Summary

Despite some deviation, from start to finish, the battle of Imphal unfolded as Slim envisioned it. He drew the *Japanese 15<sup>th</sup> Army* into a battle on the Imphal Plain, defeated it, and then destroyed it in a pursuit. The fact that 17<sup>th</sup> Division had to fight its way back and 14<sup>th</sup> Army had to retake Kohima does not detract from the fact that Slim's plan was successful. This was no happenstance. The battlefield was prepared by the construction of roads and airfields, the stockpiling of supplies, the building of strong points, and the evacuation of nonessential personnel. Subordinate commanders and staff knew their tasks and had issued orders and made their preparations. Even when things went wrong they all knew the ultimate objective and proceeded towards it. They never let themselves be diverted or bogged down with superfluous details. This was the epitome of a good plan well executed.

When the plan did not develop exactly as envisioned, Slim acted decisively. He committed 50<sup>th</sup> Parachute Brigade and 5<sup>th</sup> Division, both of which went straight into battle from the airfields. Their timely arrival delayed the 31<sup>st</sup> Division's attack on Kohima and defeated the *Japanese 15<sup>th</sup> Division*'s envelopment of Imphal from the north. These actions bought time for additional forces to be assembled and used wisely rather than be committed piecemeal. This allowed 14<sup>th</sup> Army to wrest the initiative from the enemy. While the two British Corps commanders were still embroiled in the close fight, Slim issued orders for the counter-offensive and the pursuit. His actions were instrumental in keeping pressure on the *Japanese 15<sup>th</sup> Army*. When Stilwell offered the 38<sup>th</sup> Chinese Division at the height of the battle, knowing this would mean N.C.A.C.'s offensive would be stopped, Slim refused, confident he could succeed with the forces he was bringing to bear. Throughout the battle Slim kept himself and his subordinate

commanders focused on the objective of destroying the enemy and he made sound decisive decisions to make it happen.

Key to the ability to position forces, deliver fires to support remote forces, and sustain the fight when the ground LOC. was severed was 14<sup>th</sup> Army's close continuous relationship with Eastern Air Command. Slim insisted that their two headquarters be co-located and that they share the same mess. It was not uncommon to see the Chiefs of Staff from both commands working side-by-side on common plans and directives. This close cooperation provided superlative aviation support. They attacked enemy positions that the artillery could not engage. Supplies were flown in and casualties flown out. The enemy was unable to use the roads to supply and reinforce forward areas except at night, and the Japanese air force was inconsequential to 14<sup>th</sup> Army's movements. The success of the aviation operations was largely due to Slim's insistence that these two arms, ground and air, work closely together.

Many of the participants in the battle speak of Slim's calm realistic leadership during the battle. Many considered the siege of Kohima and 17<sup>th</sup> Division's difficulty as a sign of failure. A lot of pressure, mostly from outside the theater, was placed on Slim to divert his combat power from destroying the 15<sup>th</sup> and 33<sup>rd</sup> *Divisions* and to instead attack north to re-open the Imphal – Kohima road. Slim steadfastly refused to be moved from his main objective. He proved his critics wrong and achieved a decisive victory. This was a bold move for a general whose greatest claim to fame at that time was that he successfully withdrew from Burma in 1942.

Another aspect of Slim's generalship can be seen in his organization of forces. Slim was careful not to overwhelm his subordinate commanders with too many divisions or tasks. Throughout the battle he shifted divisions and tasks between corps and his headquarters to make sure no one commander was overwhelmed. He also went to great pains to relieve them of

responsibility for their LOC.s and rear area responsibilities. These actions allowed the corps commanders to focus on fighting and defeating the Japanese.

### **SLIM'S GENERALSHIP**

The battles that raged along the India – Burma border from January to August 1944 were the turning point in the war against Japan in Southeast Asia. The Allies were victorious on all three fronts – N.C.A.C., Imphal, and Arakan – and in the long-range penetration operation of Special Force. The key element in these successes was Lieutenant General Slim's generalship. In evaluating Slim's success five areas come to the forefront – planning, administration, mobility, air mindedness, and leadership.

It was Slim who developed and executed a feasible, reasonable, acceptable, and complete plan for the 1944 campaign in Burma. Allied strategy focused on the unrealistic objective of opening a road link to China and amphibious operations in the Bay of Bengal. The Ledo Road when completed never transported enough supplies to make it worthwhile,<sup>56</sup> and the higher priorities in other theaters meant the amphibious shipping and landing craft were never available. S.E.A.C.'s efforts to execute the directives it received in support of Allied strategy were noble, but forlorn. As a result, the least preferred option, an overland advance to retake Burma, was the only feasible and effective course. It was Slim who foresaw this and set the conditions for this operational campaign by his victory at Imphal.

Slim's method of developing a plan bears striking resemblance to Marine Corps current planning process.

“My method of working out such a plan was first study the possibilities myself, and then informally to discuss them with my Brigadier General Staff, Major-General administration, and my opposite number in the Air Force. At these discussions we would arrive at the broadest outline of possible alternative courses of action, at least two, more often three to four. These alternatives the B.G.S. would give our team of planners, especially selected but comparatively junior officers, representing not only the general

and administrative staffs, but the air staff as well. They would study the practicality, advantages, and disadvantages of each course of action and were at liberty to make new suggestions of their own or devise permutations and combinations of our originals.

...There followed a meeting with all my principal staff officers at which I put over the plan, met or overrode any difficulties they might have, and sent them off to get things moving in their own spheres. The B.G.S. and the senior air staff officer then together dovetailed the land and air aspects and produced the operation orders and directives for subordinate commanders.

The wording of these orders I left to them, with the exception of one paragraph, the shortest which I invariably drafted myself – the intention. This gives, or should give, exactly what the commander intends to achieve. It is the dominating expression of his will by which, throughout the operation, every officer and soldier in the army will be guided.”<sup>57</sup>

In this statement we see the Marine Corps' current emphasis on commander involvement, operational planning teams, air-ground coordination, and the predominance of commander's intent.

Slim used this process to produce clear realistic plans that stood up to the test of execution against a determined enemy. Despite setbacks, his intent to cripple the *Japanese Burma Area Army* by drawing into a decisive battle at Imphal succeeded. It succeeded because his higher headquarters, the air forces, his adjacent commanders, and his subordinates knew his intent and bent all their efforts to support and achieve it.

The best-made plans, however, will not guarantee success. In Burma there were two foes to defeat – the Japanese and the environment. Sustaining forces in Burma was a significant challenge and 14<sup>th</sup> Army's success and *Burma Area Army*'s failure was the major deciding factor in the former's victory and the later's defeat.

Slim took several steps to ensure 14<sup>th</sup> Army was administratively prepared. First, he made his administrative officer, not his Chief of Staff, his senior staff officer. “For any army engaged in a campaign in Burma this was logical, as administrative possibilities and impossibilities would loom large, larger than strategical or tactical alternatives.”<sup>58</sup> Working

hand-in-hand with his administrative officer, Major General Alf Snelling,<sup>59</sup> he perfected the technique of aerial supplying isolated formations up to Corps size, constructing roads through trackless jungle, and organizing the flow of supplies to such a degree that unique luxury items could be delivered within hours of ordering. It was the success of these efforts that gave the infantry the confidence it needed to fight the Japanese, even when cut off. As the quality of the Allied infantry was raised to a level equal to the Japanese, it was the administrative advantage that tipped the balance in the Allies favor. The proof is in the Allied soldiers' accounts during pursuit operations that described trails littered with Japanese soldiers dead from exhaustion and starvation.

The other decisive advantage Slim cultivated over the Japanese was mobility, both tactical and operational. 14<sup>th</sup> Army's ability to out maneuver the *Burma Area Army* at Arakan and Imphal stood in stark contrast to the Allies' lack of mobility during their 1942 withdrawal. This advantage was the result of deliberate preparations by Slim.

As the reader will recall, Slim was instrumental in establishing the jungle training center at Ranchi, which trained every soldier to move and fight in the jungle. The advantage was gained by enhancing the Allies' capability to use combined arms and to supply forces. Rarely did the Allies rely solely on an infantry versus infantry fight. They were trained to combine the affects of infantry, armor, artillery, and air to deliver overwhelming combat power against the Japanese positions. Slim was insistent that tanks could be used even in the roughest terrain. At both Imphal and Arakan it was not uncommon to see a tank being winched up a deep slope to deliver point blank fire in support of the infantry. The aircraft were also used to deliver pinpoint fire in support of the infantry. The tactical mobility garnered by combining mobile firepower

with infantry comfortable with moving through the jungle provided 14th Army the ability to mass superior combat power at the decisive points.

Tactical mobility was also enhanced by the Allies' ability to re-supply forces fighting in remote areas. This was accomplished by a combination of air delivery and engineering. The close working relationship that existed with the air force allowed supplies to be air dropped to units even in the most rugged country. The Allies' superlative engineers became masters of building roads to allow vehicle access to the forward lines. The network of roads Slim had them construct throughout the Imphal Plain and to Chindwin River provided 14<sup>th</sup> Army reliable interior lines. This advantage enabled Slim to shift forces to the decisive points and to conduct a ruthless pursuit of the retreating *Japanese 15<sup>th</sup> Army*.

14<sup>th</sup> Army's operational mobility advantage relied on air transport, rail lines, and Slim's decisiveness. When the Japanese offensive struck in Arakan, Slim quickly ordered his reserve division to be committed and, when it became available, a second division. These divisions were transported by rail to Arakan and then advanced over newly constructed brick roads to the battlefield. Their prompt arrival allowed the two divisions in contact to focus their combat power against the Japanese, confident their LOC. was secure. Slim's bold decision almost proved fatal when the main Japanese force struck at Imphal. Another bold decision by Slim guaranteed victory. Slim pulled two divisions from battle in Arakan and flew them to Imphal and Dimapur. The lead brigades went straight into action, shifting the battle in favor of 14<sup>th</sup> Army.

As has probably become evident, air power played a significant role in 14<sup>th</sup> Army's victory. The main reason was the close relationship between 14<sup>th</sup> Army and Eastern Air Command. This existed because Slim was convinced that aviation capability was not just

another arm but was an integral part of the army's operations. The integration of land and air operations included battlefield interaction, close air support, and air transport. There was a single battle, rather than a ground battle or air battle. Slim summed it up in his "Afterthoughts" section in Defeat into Victory by saying, "The land and air commanders responsible at each level must not only be in close touch, they should live together as we did. Ours was a joint land and air war; its result, as much a victory for the air forces as for the army."<sup>60</sup>

Another decisive advantage Slim brought to the fight was his leadership. Mountbatten and Giffard both turned to Slim when they needed to control the difficult personalities of Stilwell and Wingate. It is a testament to Slim's leadership that these two combative fighters accepted his leadership and thrived under his command. Slim showed his flexibility by controlling Wingate with a firm hand while guiding Stilwell with a loose rein. It is hard to imagine another commander accomplishing all he did with two such challenging subordinates.

Many of the participants in the battle commented on Slim's calm, decisive, and realistic performance under pressure. Pressure was applied from two sources – the Japanese and his own higher headquarters. Whether it was the go-no-go decision for Special Force or reacting to the surprise maneuvers of *15<sup>th</sup> Army*, Slim's prompt decisions and calming affect on those around him turned potential disasters into opportunity. Some of the greatest pressures came from higher echelons of the Allied Command. The best example was the demand he turn away from destroying the divisions around Imphal to relieve Kohima. Slim steadfastly refused to be thwarted from his primary objective of destroying the attacking force and weakening the *Burma Area Army*. In the end he was proved correct and knighted for it.

Inspiring the troops was Slim's most important contribution. He spent as much as a third of his time visiting and speaking with his soldiers. His command of languages allowed him to

speak to the soldiers of his polyglot army in their native languages. Typically, he laid out why they had to beat the Japanese and convinced them that they could do it. He made it a point to visit and thank “rear area” personnel and ensured them that their efforts were critical to the Army’s success. By all accounts he was successful. The soldiers of the 14<sup>th</sup> Army saw themselves as something special and relished in their chosen name of the Forgotten Army.<sup>61</sup> This camaraderie still exists today in the Burma Star Association,<sup>62</sup> which is made up of veterans of the Burma campaigns.

## **CONCLUSION**

The battles in India-Burma from January to August 1944 marked a turning point in the war against Japan in the Southeast Asia Theater. The Allies were successful despite a number of challenges, many self inflicted. The first challenge was to organize and resource defenses of the India-Burma border. The second challenge was to train the soldiers to fight in the jungle clad mountains that typified the area of operations. Inextricably tied to this was the challenge of moving and supplying forces in the rugged environment. Developing a feasible and acceptable plan despite the absence of a coherent theater strategy was the next challenge. This challenge was made more difficult by the complex and dysfunctional command relationships. Finally, there was the challenge of defeating an aggressive and fanatical enemy who had an unblemished record of success in the India-Burma Theater.

Fortunately, the Allies had an answer to these challenges in Lieutenant General William Slim. It was Slim who established the training program that taught the soldiers to fight in the jungle, developed the tactics and techniques to move and sustain forces in the arduous terrain, provided the leadership to overcome the dysfunctional command relationships, and unified the theater strategy. Finally, and most importantly, it was Slim who developed and executed the

plan that drew in and defeated the *Japanese 15<sup>th</sup> Army* thereby setting the conditions for the successful re-conquest of Burma in 1945.

It is conceivable that Southeast Asia Command could have been successful in its 1944 battles without William Slim. However, it is probable that the victories would not have been as decisive nor the actions across the entire theater as unified.

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## **Notes.**

<sup>1</sup> Japanese units will be identified by the use of Italics.

<sup>2</sup> Slim would be knighted for his victories at Imphal and Arakan. He would eventually achieve the grade of General, be designated a Field Marshal, and be made a Viscount. His full title, at the time of his death, was Field Marshal the Viscount Slim of Yarralumla and Bishopton.

<sup>3</sup> See Map 1.

<sup>4</sup> Some of the bitterest fighting occurred over water sources. In particular, the Battle for Kohima and the initial fighting at the Ukhru. Loss of a source of water caused the abandonment of key positions on several occasions.

<sup>5</sup> Slim describes in detail his thoughts and actions on this topic in Defeat in Victory. In particular see pages 150-154.

<sup>6</sup> Throughout this paper the term administrative is used in the British context, which is roughly equivalent to the US term for logistics.

<sup>7</sup> Field Marshal Sir William Slim, Unofficial History (London: Cassell & Company Ltd., 1959), pp. 148

<sup>8</sup> In British forces during WW II the Administrative Office was in charge of logistics. This paper uses the term administrative and its derivatives in this context.

<sup>9</sup> Unofficial History, pp. 163-164.

<sup>10</sup> Ronald Lewin, Slim: The Standardbearer (London: Leo Cooper), P. 72.

<sup>11</sup> Field Marshal Sir William Slim, Defeat into Victory (Pennington, NJ: Collectors Reprints), pp. 95-96.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid., pp. 92-96.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid., p. 98.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid., p. 98.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid., p. 97.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid., p. ix.

<sup>17</sup> Kogun, Saburro in collaboration with Alvin D. Coox, (Quantico: Marine Corps Association, 1959), p. 92. The Japanese originally planned to resume the offensive during the 1943 campaign season. The plan for this operation was called *PLAN 21*. The plan's objective was to move into eastern India and seize a buffer area. The new defense was to be on the line Dimapur – Silchar, thereby depriving the allies of Imphal and the L.O.C.s in eastern Assam. The Japanese also hoped the Indian people would rise up and, if not throw out, at least absorb the British forces in Asia. The Japanese offensive was canceled because preparations were insufficient and there were higher priorities in the Pacific Theater.

<sup>18</sup> Compilation drawn from Kogun, pp. 92-93, and Burma Operations Record 15<sup>th</sup> Army Operations in Imphal Area and Withdrawal to Northern Burma, pp. 29-30. This new strategy had resistance from the logisticians and, initially, the Japanese *Imperial General Headquarters (IGHQ)*. The logisticians were concerned that they could not sustain forces farther west than the line of hills between the Chindwin and Imphal. *IGHQ* was concerned about the aggressiveness of the planned offensive and required five questions be answered before rendering a decision, the questions were:

- (i) Could the *Southern Army* deal successfully with an Allied seaborne attack from the Bay of Bengal in the midst of the *U-GO Operation* (code name for seizure of Imphal)?
- (ii) In view of the increased length of the front which would result from the occupation of Imphal, was there sufficient strength to guarantee the continued defense of Burma?
- (iii) Could the small Japanese air force keep pace with the ground forces and support them throughout the operation?
- (iv) Was the supply position satisfactory?
- (v) Could the 15<sup>th</sup> Army's plans be relied upon?

These questions would prove to be prescient.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid., pp. 76-78.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid., pp. 39-45.

<sup>21</sup> Raymond Callahan, Burma 1942-1945 (Newark: University of Delaware Press, 1978), p. 124

<sup>22</sup> Burma 1942-1945, p. 82.

<sup>23</sup> The War Against Japan, Volume III, The Decisive Battles, p. 67.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid., p. 67. The Sextant Conference held in Cairo in December 1943 reaffirmed the Central and Southwest Pacific Theaters were the main theater against Japan. Thus, operations in Southeast Asia were to be designed to help the Pacific drive.

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<sup>25</sup> Churchill, Chaing Kai Shek, and the British Chiefs of Staff were all looking for some kind of amphibious operation in the Bay of Bengal or farther east. The U.S. was anticipating an overland advance from Ledo to Myitkyina then to China and demanded full support to the maintenance of the air link to China. Mountbatten was also directed to support Wingate's long range penetration operation into northern and central Burma. He had to also consider the continuing limited offensive underway in Arakan and the need to defend the Imphal plain to protect the Assam L.O.C.

<sup>26</sup> Defeat into Victory, p. 175.

<sup>27</sup> The War Against Japan, Volume III, The Decisive Battles, pp. 60–61.

<sup>28</sup> The fight for transport assets, amphibious and aerial, would be a constant battle for Mountbatten and the limiting factor on his operations. In particular, he would battle with the combined Chiefs of Staff for the authority to control or, at a minimum, divert for short periods transport aircraft from the "Hump". His eventual success in this endeavor was his major contribution to 14<sup>th</sup> Army's victories in 1944.

<sup>29</sup> Defeat into Victory, p. 178.

<sup>30</sup> Ibid., p. 215.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid., p. 186.

<sup>32</sup> Ibid., pp. 225-234 and pp. 399 to 410.

<sup>33</sup> The War Against Japan, Volume III, The Decisive Battles, p.225.

<sup>34</sup> Defeat into Victory, p.243. Brigadier General Lentaigne assumed command when Major General Wingate died in a plane crash on 24 March 1944.

<sup>35</sup> Ibid., p. 237. Stilwell revealed his plan to seize Myitkyina by surprise envelopment on 2 March 1944 and asked Slim to tell no one. The envelopment commenced 28 April, the airfield was seized 19 May, and the town is finally seized on 3 August.

<sup>36</sup> Ibid., p. 242.

<sup>37</sup> The War Against Japan, Volume III, The Decisive Battles, p.119.

<sup>38</sup> Ibid., p. 199.

<sup>39</sup> Ibid., p. 222.

<sup>40</sup> Major General Ord Wingate dies in a plane crash during the height of the crisis on 24 March 1944. XV<sup>th</sup> Corps was still fighting to open its lateral communications between divisions and to free up its rear area in Arakan. The Japanese offensive was in full swing at Imphal and they were threatening Kohima and Dimapur. N.C.A.C had just broken into the Mogaung Valley and Stilwell was preparing for a turning movement aimed at Myitkyina. Special Force has all of its brigades either in combat or preparing to be committed.

<sup>41</sup> Defeat into Victory, p. 190.

<sup>42</sup> Ibid., p. 191.

<sup>43</sup> Ibid., p. 227. Wingate ordered that no fly-over of the landing zones occur the week prior to D-Day. The aviators did not get the order and fortuitously conducted the mission. The obstruction was in fact caused by loggers using the landing zone to dry out teak trees.

<sup>44</sup> Ibid., p.233.

<sup>45</sup> Burma Operations Record 15<sup>th</sup> Army Operations in Imphal Area and Withdrawal to Northern Burma, pp. 149-150.

<sup>46</sup> Burma Operations Record 15<sup>th</sup> Army Operations in Imphal Area and Withdrawal to Northern Burma, pp. 38-39.

<sup>47</sup> The War Against Japan, Volume III, The Decisive Battles, p. 118.

<sup>48</sup> Unless otherwise noted all divisions and brigades are from the Indian Army.

<sup>49</sup> The War Against Japan, Volume III, The Decisive Battles, Chapter X, pp. 133-160. This account of the battle strikes the best balance between readability and detail.

<sup>50</sup> Defeat into Victory, p. 196.

<sup>51</sup> Ibid., p. 246.

<sup>52</sup> The War Against Japan, Volume III, The Decisive Battles, p. 204.

<sup>53</sup> Defeat into Victory, p.249.

<sup>54</sup> Ibid., p.250.

<sup>55</sup> The synopsis of the battle is drawn from a number of sources. For more information see Slim's Defeat into Victory, Book IV or the British Official History, The War Against Japan, Volume III, The Decisive Battles, Chapters XIII, XVI, XXI, and XXIII-XXV.

<sup>56</sup> Professor Raymond Callahan points out in his book; Burma 1942-45 (Newark: University of Delaware Press, 1979), p. 163; that the Ledo-Burma road never lived up to expectation. From its opening in January 1945 to its obsolescence in October 1945 only 38,000 tons of supplies and equipment were moved by this route. In contrast, in its last month of operation, the airlift hump moved 39,000 tons of supplies and equipment.

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<sup>57</sup> Defeat into Victory, pp.181-182.

<sup>58</sup> Ibid., p. 181.

<sup>59</sup> This was not the first time Slim had sought out the services of Major General Snelling. Snelling had been his administrative officer when he commanded the 10<sup>th</sup> Indian Division in Iraq, Syria, and Iran.

<sup>60</sup> Defeat into Victory, p. 455.

<sup>61</sup> Ibid., pp. 154-159.

<sup>62</sup> The Burma Star Association maintains a web site at <http://burmestar.org.uk>. The Association and its web site help veterans stay in touch and pass on information and historical data. The association even helps members on pension to acquire inexpensive gas and electric service.